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World War II Spies Plan Symposium on O.S.S.

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Nov. 10 After 40 years, some of America's grand old spies are preparing to come in from the cold. They want to tell their story before it is too late.

The people involved were part of the Office of Strategic Services, the nation's first organized nonmilitary espionage and sabotage agency, which came into being in World War II and was a forerunner to today's Central Intelligence Agency.

In particular, these former undercover comrades want to shine up the somewhat disputed image of their leader of those days, Gen. William J. Donovan, and they want to rebut some recent assertations that the best spies in the war were British, not American. To that end, some of them are to meet here in the next two weeks to plan for a symposium in the spring at which they will attempt to spread on the record the accomplishments of the O.S.S. and the contributions of Wild Bill Donovan, who died in 1959. If things go well, they then hope to compile a written record of the O.S.S.

"We feel Donovan has been maligned a little," said a former O.S.S. official and former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, Ray Cline. "There has been an emphasis on his being a cowboy, while others of us think he was more a scholar, a temperamental, romantic type figure, but with a shrewd understanding of Washington politics."

Another old intelligence hand, Max Corvo, publisher of a weekly newspaper in Midddletown, Conn., says former O.S.S. operatives particularly want to rebut an assertion by Bradley F. Smith in his book "The Shadow Warriors" that the O.S.S. accomplished little and that the really successful spies were the British agents.

Age Is the Enemy Now

Mr. Corvo says it is especially important that the surviving O.S.S. veterans now get a chance to tell their story because age is doing what enemy agents did not to the 25,000 people who served in the agency before it was abolished shortly after the war. "Most of our people are in their 70's," he said. "During the last five years, I have been to several meetings and you can see that time has taken its toll."

The O.S.S. was started after Pearl Harbor when President Roosevelt asked General Donovan, a hero in World War I, to set up an agency separate from the military's intelligence services. Participants in the symposium will be asked to bring with them evidence of all that happened thereafter, for lots of things are missing from the files although the secrecy protections were taken off 2,000 cubic feet of archives last summer.

Notes Will Be Sought

"It is my contention that a lot of members took some documents with them, probably as mementoes," Mr. Corvo said. "We are going to call on them to make any notes they made available."

The people scheduled to meet here for the planning session include Mr. Corvo; William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, as well as two former C.I.A. directors, William Colby and Richard Helms; Mr. Cline, now a professor at Georgetown University, and Michael Burke, who once ran the New York Yankees, the New York Knicks and the New York Rangers.

Mr. Casey said: "The O.S.S. activities against Germany and Japan were really the genesis of today's American intelligence service, and it is an important and interesting story. It would be a worthwhile thing to put it together from the historical point of view."

Mr. Helms, now a consultant, said of the O.S.S. history project: "The goal is a more balanced description. It is a very ambitious project, and whether it is going to fly is something else. Look at the calendar and you'll see that most people who served in the O.S.S. are no longer children."

He Learned Linotype Italian

Mr. Corvo, at 65 years old, is one of the younger veterans. He got involved as a spy in Italy, he said, because he had learned idiomatic Italian as a youth by setting type at his father's newspaper, then Il Bollettino, which has since been converted into The Bulletin, a weekly paper published in Italian and English.

Mr. Cline said: "At 67, they consider me one of the younger guys. The feeling of the old O.S.S. crowd is that we are going to die off soon. If someone doesn't capture Bill Donovan and those times, it's going to be lost. It behooves us to get our act together."

When they get together, will they remember each others' agent numbers, as in 007 for James Bond? Mr. Donovan was 109 and Allen Dulles, later to head the C.I.A., 110.

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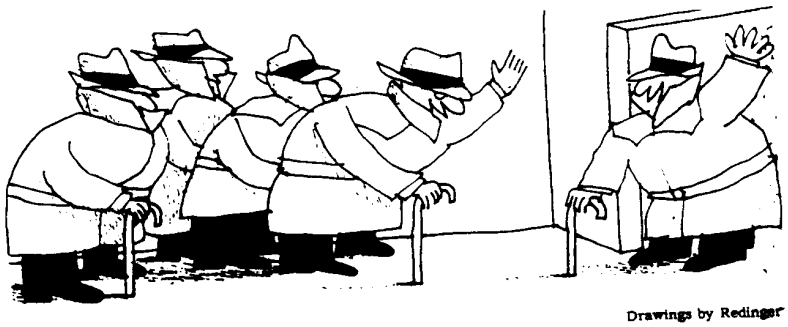

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